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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NICOSIA 000685

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE, IO/UNP

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [UNFICYP](#) [CY](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TALAT WILL MEET, BUT IS WARY OF PAPADAPOULOS'S
INTENTIONS

REF: A. NICOSIA 675
[1](#)B. NICOSIA 674

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Domestic political concerns -- mainly the need to show Greek Cypriot voters that their president sought a Cyprus Problem solution -- was driving Tassos Papadopoulos's push for a meeting of community leaders, "TRNC President" Mehmet Ali Talat told the Ambassador August 20. Despite reluctance to tender Papadopoulos any electoral assistance, Talat had agreed to meet, and Turkish Cypriot negotiator Rashit Pertev would attempt August 21 to negotiate a date with counterpart Tasos Tzionis (Note: they agreed to September 5). Turning to the August 18 hijacking of a Turkish jetliner flight that originated in northern Cyprus, Talat concurred that T/C aviation experts should revisit procedures at Ercan airport, and that T/C law enforcement should cooperate with USG counterparts to confirm or disprove the hijackers' alleged al-Qaeda connection. On petroleum exploration in Cypriot waters and the recently-concluded first bidding round (Ref A), Talat again argued that Papadopoulos was playing electoral games; worse, the "Greek Cypriot President" had no right to represent the entire island in negotiating international treaties.

[1](#)2. (C) His visage grew even grimmer when discussing interfaith dialogue and Cyprus's most visible religious leaders. South of the Green Line, the Archbishop had dropped all attempts at cloaking his hard-line political leanings and in essence had become Papadopoulos's second spokesman, Talat claimed (Septel). He himself had erred in nominating the now-departed Mufti, a reputed hard-partying womanizer and world-class name-dropper whose activities had brought shame on his community (Ref B). On domestic T/C politics, the "President" avoided showing his cards on the future of the CTP-OP coalition and downplayed possibilities the "TRNC" would swap out its parliamentary system for a presidential one. Talat concluded the conversation with assurances the "government" would protect the pristine Karpass Peninsula from unbridled development, a growing fear now that high-voltage electrical power has nearly reached its tip (Septel). END SUMMARY.

Agreement to Meet, but Doubts Over Usefulness

[1](#)3. (C) Talat remained skeptical of RoC President Papadopoulos's intentions vis-a-vis a possible meeting of community leaders. "Papadopoulos needs this meeting to show his electorate and the international community he has not abandoned the bizonal, bicomunal solution," he declared to the Ambassador. Despite his desire not to throw the

hard-line President an electoral lifeline, Talat -- no doubt trying to mitigate the damage to his international reputation wrought by the last several months of clear obstructionism in the UN process -- had agreed to meet, instructing negotiator Pertev to seek an early date. "The closer we get to the UN General Assembly, the more spin he'll put on the get-together," he asserted. Talat doubted any substantive breakthroughs would occur, but agreed with the Ambassador's assertion that the high-level gathering offered an opportunity to improve the negative climate currently characterizing bicomunal relations. (Note: Meeting under UNFICYP auspices August 21, community representatives Tzionis and Pertev set a September 5 date for their respective leaders to meet; UN SRSG Michael Moller will host the widely-anticipated gathering at his Nicosia residence.)

¶4. (C) Talat plainly hoped Papadopoulos would lose the February's RoC presidential elections. The candidacy of AKEL General Secretary Dimitris Christofias had resulted in the first "truly democratic" campaign in Greek Cypriot history, he argued. "Before, it was all coalitions. Kyprianou, Vasiliou -- what support did they have individually, 10 percent?" he questioned. Now, however, G/Cs would enjoy a real choice, and Talat hoped they would cast their ballot against the incumbent. He particularly appreciated DISY-supported challenger Ioannis Kasoulides's announcement he would seek to meet Talat as his first official duty.

Ercan Hijacking: Relief Over Outcome

¶5. (C) Ercan Airport had returned to normal after the August 18 hijacking, Talat revealed. Relieved that Turkish police

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in Antalya had reported the "plastique" the hijackers carried in reality was Playdough -- indicating no security breach had occurred at Ercan -- he now was directing his attention and ire at the "know-it-all" Turkish Cypriot journalists who had leveled charges of incompetence at T/C aviation authorities. The Ambassador shared his relief, but pressed Talat to exploit the hijacking by reviewing aviation security procedures in north Cyprus; even if existing procedures were effective, cautioned the Ambassador, such incidents provided an opportunity to review whether measures could be further improved. Further, while personally skeptical, the Ambassador voiced great concern over reports of the Palestinian suspect's alleged al-Qaeda links, and urged seamless cooperation between USG and relevant law enforcement in investigating whether the reports had any basis in fact. Talat agreed the allegation merited further checking and close coordination.

On Oil, Obligated to Seek Own Deal

¶6. (C) "For inter-communal political gain" also described Papadopoulos's motivations for exploitation of Cyprus's offshore oil and gas reserves, Talat reasoned, alleging the President would manage the bidding process to eke out every last vote. Under the current state of affairs, with Turkish Cypriots excluded from the Republic of Cyprus machinery, G/Cs had no right to negotiate treaties on behalf of the entire island, he emphasized. "Regrettably we don't have the military to stop them," a rather odd comment given the balance of forces on the island. On the other hand, Turkey would act decisively in defense of Turkish Cypriot interests. Talat offered no convincing argument why his "government's" own hydrocarbon agreement with Turkey passed muster, while the RoC's with Egypt and Lebanon did not. "Ours was negotiated by a previous 'administration' and never implemented," he lamely offered. Nonetheless, were the RoC to continue with the tendering and exploitation process, Talat felt obliged to reciprocate.

17. (C) Continuing the negative run, the T/C leader protested the Embassy's alleged statements of support for the RoC's gas/oil decisions. The USG had voiced a narrow opinion solely on the legality of sovereign states to negotiate international instruments, the Ambassador retorted; our alleged "broader support" was the product of Commerce Minister Antonis Michaelides and other RoC officials publicizing (and altering the content of) private conversations. He reiterated the Embassy's fundamental message: that any plans and activities to exploit Cyprus's mineral wealth should benefit all Cypriots and serve to edge the sides closer together, and that all parties should chart their actions according to how the possibility of new mineral wealth could facilitate reunification, not deepen divisions. Talat dismissed out of hand the Ambassador's suggestion to Michaelides that the RoC deposit a percentage of possible future energy royalties into a separate fund for T/Cs. "We would never accept it," he assured. "Neither did Papadopoulos," the Ambassador responded.

Will No One Rid Me of this Priest...and this Mufti?

18. (C) Talat's Communist roots emerged in discussing the island's two most-prominent clerics. "By shining spotlights on religious leaders and emphasizing their importance," Talat accused, "the U.S. created people like (Orthodox Archbishop) Chrysostomos," leader of the Church of Cyprus. Concentrating such power in spiritual figures seemed anachronistic in modern times, he thought. Conversely, in the Turkish Cypriot community the position of "Mufti" held real power only during the British colonial period (1871-1960); the last Mufti, Ahmet Yonluer, was in fact only a mid-level civil servant in the Religious Affairs department. Talat admitted to having erred in naming the ambitious, unpredictable, and anything-but-pious Yonluer to the position last year. Claiming that interfaith dialogue actually had deteriorated during the Mufti's tenure despite the latter's high-profile meeting with Chrysostomos, Talat was untroubled by his August resignation.

19. (C) Talat reserved his harshest appraisal for the Archbishop's recent rantings. "It is simply not possible to cooperate with this Church," he stated matter-of-factly, pointing to Chrysostomos's hard-line interventions into Greek Cypriot politics. He disparaged the Archbishop's intentions

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to rehabilitate every Orthodox site in northern Cyprus as a thinly-veiled attempt to re-exert authority there, promising to fight the effort. Nonetheless, "TRNC officials" would continue to preserve religious properties and ensure that Christian minorities enclaved in the north could freely practice their faith. "At the same time, the Greeks are bulldozing mosques and entire T/C villages in the south, yet the international community punishes us," he decried. The Ambassador, after declaring that religious freedom issues are vital in any case, told Talat that Turkish Cypriots had a very strong interest in cooperating with Church figures in the preservation of churches and other cultural heritage sites, and that they should also seek to maintain their own sites in the south. Such actions helped to mend relations between the communities and help to address in foreign capitals a very potent weapon that T/C enemies used against them.

Coalition Holding, for Now

110. (C) Dodging the Ambassador's inquiries over the health and continued viability of the CTP-OP coalition, Talat claimed such political maneuverings lay squarely in "Prime Minister" Ferdi Soyer's lap. The OP arrangement had proven a

mistake, he offered, but the alternative -- bringing DP back into "government" -- was worse. "I do not trust (DP leader) Serdar Denktash's intentions, Talat explained. As to recently-floated plans to seek "constitutional" changes that would exchange the "TRNC's" parliamentary system for a presidential one, the T/C leader acknowledged a possible positive outcome: reducing the impact of internal party politics on governance. Entrenched leaders across the political spectrum likely would oppose the move, Talat surmised, and the exigencies of changing the "TRNC Constitution" -- a two-thirds majority in "Parliament," and a referendum decision on every article -- looked impossible to meet.

Karpass: Serve the Citizens, not the Developers

¶11. (C) Turkish Cypriot media had inflated the negative effects on the environment of the "government's" decision to bring high-voltage power to Karpass's tip, Talat alleged. One specific complaint, that the line's current vastly exceeded the needs of the few T/Cs residing there, was explained on technical grounds: high voltage was required to transmit electricity great distances. "Environmentalists should not doubt my credentials," he asserted, pointing to his efforts in 1995 when, as acting "Minister of Agriculture" and "Minister of Environment," he had pushed the "Council of Ministers" to declare parts of Karpass a "national" park. Now, his "government" sought to upgrade the "COM" decision into "law" in order to safeguard the area's fragile, unique ecosystem. Casting some doubt on his green intentions, however, Talat noted that authorities concurrently were crafting a "balanced" development plan that weighed the needs of preservationists, Karpass residents and land owners, and developers alike.

Comment

¶12. (C) Mehmet Ali Talat appeared drained August 20, whether from normal "presidential" stress or something worse (persistent rumors claim he suffers from prostate or another form of cancer). We have no better guess than his weak constitution to explain Talat's self-contradictory, off-base arguments over negotiating rights for oil and gas exploration, for example. Not so illogical were his observations on Papadopoulos's intentions at the upcoming leaders' meetings -- undoubtedly the President seeks to burnish his pro-solution ("but a solution that benefits Greek Cypriots, unlike the Annan Plan") credentials in hopes of winning more votes. Our most recent response to Talat echoed the Embassy's recommendations the moment July 8 was signed: walk in prepared to talk substance. If Papadopoulos engages seriously, both sides win. If not, you'll have smoked out the President's true intentions and can hang the intransigent label on him. Talat seems to be thinking similarly; our UN contacts report that T/C representative Pertev voiced his boss's eagerness to meet Papadopoulos September 5, sans preconditions.

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¶13. (C) Talat's commentary on the state of interfaith dialogue troubles us. Not that he's wrong on Chrysostomos, whom we suspect desires to replace "Archbishop" with "Ethnarch" on his calling cards. Talat has failed, though, to see real ideological divisions within the Church that he could exploit to bring the communities closer together. We see similar naivete (or worse, obfuscation) in his conviction that a "government" promise alone will prevent Kyrenia-style development from following the voltage to Karpass.
SCHLICHER